Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 9 | Issue 4 Article 8

10-1-1992

Yearley, MENCIUS AND AQUINAS: THEORIES OF VIRTUE AND CONCEPTIONS OF COURAGE (VOL. II)

Jean Porter

ophy and the Christian Faith (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), pp. 241-78.

11. He is drawing on a discussion by Max Black in "The Identity of Indiscernibles" in his *Problems of Analysis* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953), pp. 80-92 (to which Hughes provides no reference). The fact that Black's example is of a world containing only two qualitatively *and relationally* indiscernible spheres seems to make it inappropriate for Hughes's purpose here: "We might suppose that each was made of chemically pure iron, had a diameter of one mile, that they had the same temperature, color, and so on, and that nothing else existed. Then every quality and relational characteristic of the one would also be a property of the other" (p. 83).

12. Hughes comes close to admitting this when he says "the Father and the Son are discernible, *in that* the Son is generated by the Father and the Father is not" (p. 214; emphasis added).

13. We are grateful to Christopher Hughes for corresponding with us about some of the issues in his book.

Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage, by **Lee Yearley**. Volume Two in the series, "Toward a Comparative Philosophy of Religions," Frank E. Reynolds and David Tracy, editors. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990. Pp. xiv and 280. 16.95 (paper).

JEAN PORTER, University of Notre Dame

In his introduction, Frank Reynolds describes the aim of the series, "Towards a Comparative Philosophy of Religions," as "the development of a new kind of comparative philosophy of religions that is global in its perspective and in tune with contemporary philosophical developments and issues" (xi). At least some of the philosophical developments to which Reynolds refers have made this a daunting task indeed. In particular, the growing consensus against epistemological foundationalism has raised questions as to whether it is possible genuinely to understand, much less to assess, intellectual and moral traditions radically different from the observer's own. Seen in this light, earlier efforts to spell out a universal core of beliefs and values embedded within the world's great religions are likely to appear as drastic oversimplifications at best, distorting projections of the observer's own convictions at the worst.

And yet, it is hard to know what alternative we have. We could follow the example of those anthropologists who offer detailed "thick" descriptions of the traditions of other societies, without attempting to identify any common ground between them and us. But while this approach avoids the pitfalls of a false universalism, it does not offer much in the way of a basis for dialogue among those who have been formed in disparate traditions. And given the

realities of global interdependence, the need for such a dialogue has never been more apparent.

In his comparative study of the theories of virtue and the notions of courage contained in the works of Aquinas (d.1274) and the Chinese Confucian philosopher Mencius (4th century B.C.E.), Lee Yearley sets two goals for himself. He offers an illuminating analysis and comparison of two central thinkers from two very different traditions, and in addition, he also develops a methodology for comparative religious ethics that allows for real comparisons and assessments, while still acknowledging the incommensurability of at least some of the main religious traditions. And of course, these two aims are not unconnected. Yearley has not only taken two premodern thinkers as the objects of his research, he has also taken much of his methodology from one of them. Specifically, his comparative work draws on Aquinas' theory of the virtues and his use of analogical analysis to provide a model for bringing together seemingly disparate concepts under one overall scheme.

As Yearley acknowledges, Aquinas' moral theory may seem to be "a very odd place" to look for a model for comparative religious ethics (181). But further reflection indicates that Yearley's move is not as odd as it may at first appear to be. Aquinas' own task as a moral theorist required him to bring together diverse and sometimes incommensurable traditions and thinkers, including Aristotle and his Islamic and Jewish interpreters, Augustine and his many interpreters, and a wide range of other classical and Christian sources. And as Yearley argues, Aquinas' analysis of virtues in terms of their parts, and his use of analogical analysis of key concepts, enabled him to bring together in creative and unexpected ways the diverse conceptions of human flourishing that he found in his sources. He was of course attempting to develop a unified theoretical synthesis, whereas the modern comparativist seeks understanding without necessarily moving towards a synthesis. But Yearley argues, brilliantly and convincingly, that Aquinas' method can nonetheless suggest a way of approaching the comparative study of religious ethics today.

He summarizes Aquinas' theory of virtue as follows: "Aquinas argues that a virtue can have three parts. First are the qualities, the component parts, that help shape a single virtue's action: for example, memory and foresight in prudence. Second are those distinct virtues, allied virtues, that share the essential characteristic of the primary virtue but fail to express it fully, even if they may express other qualities of the primary virtue more fully than it does. . . Third are those separable and substantially different activities of a virtue, the types of a virtue, that appear when the virtue operates in distinct spheres of life; for example, military and political prudence. . .The idea that virtues have parts, as well as most other aspects of Aquinas's attempts to harmonize different thinkers' ideas on virtues, rests on one major foundation:

the theoretical procedures or performances involved in the analysis of analogical predication" (184-185). By means of this apparatus, Aquinas is able to bring together accounts of virtue that seem at first glance to have little in common, or even to be in opposition. For example, he brings together Augustine's account of patience with Aristotle's very different account of courage by taking Augustinian patience to be a component or allied part of Aristotelian courage, and he then further extends Aristotle's conception of courage to include both martyrdom and endurance through an analogical extension of the concepts of death and warfare that are central to that conception.

Yearley appropriates Aquinas' methods in a context provided by the philosopher Robin Horton. According to Horton, in attempting to understand any extended tradition, we must distinguish between primary theories, which systematize the observations and data that accumulate in any society, and secondary theories, which attempt to explain the world of natural observations in terms of unseen or abstract realities, for example, ideal forms or benevolent spirits. To this division of kinds of theories Yearley adds a third, namely, the practical theory, which for him includes any effort to derive norms for action from one's primary and secondary theories.

At the level of primary theories Mencius and Aquinas unsurprisingly have a great deal in common; for example, their most basic accounts of the place of sexual desire and fear in human life are very similar. At the level of secondary theories they are again similar in some respects; for example, they would agree that there is a given human nature, defined in part in terms of unrealized capacities which depend for their actualization on the action of a power that transcends the human. But resemblances at this level are thin; that is to say, they are so abstract, or else have to do with such a narrowly circumscribed area of life, that they tell us very little about either Mencius or Aquinas, or about the practical concerns central to each. Thus, when we ask just how Mencius and Aquinas understand the relation between human and transhuman forces in the development of human character, it becomes clear that each thinker spells out that relationship in terms of conceptions, of numinous psychophysical energy (*ch'i*) or of divine grace (*gratia*), that only make sense within the wider intellectual framework that each one develops. If the fully textured secondary theories of each are not taken into account, therefore, the thin similarities at this level may conceal the profound differences between the Chinese philosopher and the Italian theologian.

But when we turn to the practical theories of Mencius and Aquinas, a more interesting pattern of differences and similarities emerges. At this level, each thinker works out an account of human flourishing, and the kinds of virtues productive of human flourishing, that goes well beyond the crude folk psychology of his received primary theories of human action and motivation, and yet is developed in relative independence of his secondary theory. (This

is of course a controversial claim, at least as applied to Aquinas, but I believe Yearley is correct.) Hence, if we are to identify significant similarities between the theories of Mencius and Aquinas, we will be most likely to be successful when comparing their practical theories of human flourishing and its corresponding virtues. And Yearley argues that this is indeed the case. Although they are clearly dissimilar in many ways, Mencius' and Aquinas' accounts of the virtues, analyzed along the lines suggested by Aquinas' analogical theory of virtue, reveal unexpected and illuminating similarities. For example, while the notion of dispositions is more congenial to Aquinas' theory than to Mencius', it nonetheless serves to illuminate a range of notions in the latter; in turn, Mencius' reflections on automatic reactions can help to clarify Aquinas' accounts of intelligent dispositions, habits, tendencies, and invariant reactions. This means of analysis therefore serves to clarify the thought of two very different moral theorists, to bring to light unexpected similarities between them, and to aid us in our own efforts to think through the issues that they raise.

It is unfortunate that a book of this sort, which crosses so many disciplinary lines, will probably be neglected by many "pure" scholars in the fields of moral philosophy, religious ethics, and the history of moral thought. Yearley has written what is one of the most significant books in recent years in all of these areas. His approach will of course be controversial, not least because he contends that the moral thought of at least some religious thinkers can be understood apart from their religious theories, to some degree at least. But the questions that his book raises are a mark of the cogency and importance of his arguments. His treatments of Mencius and Aquinas are always illuminating, and while I did not agree with his interpretations of Aquinas at every point, his treatment of Aquinas' theory of the virtues is by far the best that I have ever seen. (I am not competent to evaluate his interpretation of Mencius.) Even more importantly, he has managed to offer a method for the comparative study of religious ethics that is at least *prima facie* plausible, and whether it is finally judged to be successful or not, that in itself is a rare and important achievement. No serious scholar of moral thought in any of its forms can afford to neglect this seminal book.

Being and Goodness: The Concept of the Good in Metaphysics and Philosophical Theology, edited by **Scott MacDonald**. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991. Pp. ix and 328. $43.95 (cloth)/$14.95 (paper).

Reviewed by DAVID BURRELL, C.S.C., University of Notre Dame.

As the title suggests, this collection testifies to the renewed interest in medieval philosophical theology. The subtitle is also suggestive, reminding us that